

Names and Naming in Chinua Achebe's Novels*

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If you want to know how life has treated an Igbo man, a good place to look is the names his children bear.

—Achebe in *Morning Yet On . . .*

Africans, especially the Igbo, know the indispensable part names play in their cultures and societies; and no African writer makes a better use of names and naming than Chinua Achebe to express “ideas, aspirations, sorrows or philosophical comments”¹ on the lives of the people of his novels. For this reason, names and naming are discussed here to enhance appreciation of the meanings and functions of names in Achebe's novels, while increasing understanding of traditional Igbo culture and the novelist's general thematic concerns. My endeavours here should not be regarded as a literary onomastic study of the names,² but rather as a critical analysis based on my critical training and native knowledge of Igbo culture.

Basically, four categories of names can be traced throughout Achebe's novels,³ using cultural and religious derivations of the names as criteria. To the first group belong names of traditional characters found principally in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, novels which treat of traditional Igbo life just before and immediately after

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¹Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 471.

²Leonard R. N. Ashley recommends the study of literary onomastics. See his “Names Into Words, And Other Examples of The Possibilities of Extending The Boundaries of Literary Onomastics,” in *Literary Onomastics Studies*, Vol. VII, ed. Grace Alvarez-Altman and Frederick Burelbach (Brockport, New York: State University, 1980), pp. 1–24.

³These categories follow the ones outlined by Elizabeth M. Rajec in her “Franz Kafka and Philip Roth: their use of Literary Onomastics (Based on *The Professor of Desire*),” in *Literary Onomastics Studies*, Vol. VII, pp. 69–70.

the advent of the white men in Igboland. The names are purely indigenous including, among others, Okonkwo, Obierika, Ezulu, Nwaka and Ogbuefi Ezudu.

The second category, also found in the two novels mentioned above, comprises Biblical and foreign names given to missionaries from outside the Igbo clans—Rev. James Smith and Mr. Goodcountry—and those given to Igbo Christian converts who now adopt such names as a mark of their conversion while retaining their family names: Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, becomes Isaac Okonkwo, and Ezeulu's son, Oduche will be called Peter when the time comes for his baptism.⁴

To the third category belong names which are found in the modern societies of *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*; they are names which depict their bearers as either established Christians or "educated" or both. Hence we find Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart* being addressed as Mr. Isaac Okonkwo, catechist of the Church Missionary Society in *No Longer at Ease* (p. 8); and Chief the Honourable M. A. Nanga, M.P., in *A man of the People* (p. 1) does not only regard himself as highly educated, but also thinks he is honourable for being a member of parliament. The satire on his name will be discussed later.

Finally, to the last group of names belong the names of colonial administrators and officers which are Anglo-Saxon in character because Nigeria, the setting of all four novels, was ruled by Britain. The names include the D.C., George Allen, Mr. Green, Captain Winterbottom and Mr. Clarke.

Achebe, in his novels, rewrites the colonial history of Nigeria (especially as it affects traditional Igbo communities) with special reference to the transformation that took place in the religious, educational, economic and socio-political culture of the people. To do so realistically, he creates characters who serve as parties to the tragic Igbo encounter with Europe, giving them names which seem to suggest, "By their names you shall know them." In other words, Achebe uses naming as a means of making historical comments on the establishment and development of Christianity, Western Education and British Administration in Nigeria; and the names contain subtle memories of the agents of such establishments and developments. Classifying the names as we have so far done helps to identify the characters as traditional or modern, indigenous or foreign, Christian or heathen,

⁴Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 49.

and educated or uneducated, depending on what meaning and importance one attaches to such colonial terminology, all too familiar in books which discuss African affairs. But it is an exercise in socio-anthropological identification of names which does not say very much about the novels as literary works.

Therefore, another way of classifying the names is to group them according to their literary function; that entails analyzing and evaluating how the names serve Achebe's fictional purposes. Approached this way, we find that the "names contribute to the literary flavour of formal and informal conversation, adding a depth or a succinctness through their meanings, overtones, or metaphors. They can also play a directly literary role."⁵ Using then their literary role as a criterion, the names in Achebe's novels could be classified into five groups that overlap: dedicatory names; philosophical names; praise names; metaphoric names; and proverbial names. The groups overlap because one name could belong to more than one of the groups, and the names, regardless of their individual groups, have a basic function—they identify and describe the characters who bear them.

DEDICATORY NAMES

Some of the traditional Igbo characters in Achebe's novels bear dedicatory names just as they do in actual Igbo societies. Such names include Nwankwo, Nweke, Nwoye and Nwafo; Okonkwo, Okeke, Okoye and Okafo given to males, or Mgbokwo, Mgbekwe, Mgborie and Mgbafo given to females. They are names which refer to either the four days which make up the Igbo market week (Nkwo, Eke, Oye and Afo) on which their bearers were born, or the deities in charge of such market days. As in other societies, names in Igbo societies can distinguish the sexes of their bearers. In general Igbo grammar, the prefix, *oke*, indicates male and *nne* female; but when describing the sex of a child, *oko* (short form of *okorobia* or boy) for the male and *mgbo* (from *agboghobia* or girl) for the female, are used instead of *oke* and *nne* which tend to suggest adulthood. The name, Okonkwo, which is a combination of *Oko* and *Nkwo*, means a male child born on *Nkwo* market day; just as the combination of *Mgbo* and *Afo* which becomes [Mgb(o)afo]; *Mgbafo* means a female child born on *Afo* market day. If, however, parents do not want to emphasize the sex of the child, they simply give him the name *Nwafo*, from [Nwa(a)fo] *nwa* (child)

⁵Finnegan, p. 472.

born on Afo (market day). But some of these names (Nwafo, Nwan-kwo, Nweke, and Nwoye) are usually given to males, although as a general principle, they do not emphasize the sex of their bearers.

Nkwo, regarded by some Igbo clans as the first of the four Igbo weekdays, has a very symbolic meaning to men like Okonkwo who are born on it; but modern Igbo calendars record Afo as the first weekday for all Igbo. However, any of the four days could be first and symbolic to the Igbo clan that holds its market on it. For Umuofia, the first day of the week is Nkwo.

By naming the hero of *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo, Achebe creates an ideal character, one who becomes an embodiment of masculinity and of all the qualities a man should possess in a warlike society such as Umuofia: he is an achiever, wrestler, titled man and warrior. Okonkwo is all these and more. He wants to be first among his equals, just as his birthday, Nkwo, is the first among Igbo weekdays:

Okonkwo on his bamboo bed tried to figure out the nature of the emergency—war with a neighboring clan? That seemed the most likely reason, and he was not afraid of war. He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head. (p. 14)

Because the hero's character matches his name, Okonkwo becomes one of those Igbo literary characteronyms such as Omenuko, Dinkpa, Dimgba, and Agu—names assumed by some Igbo readers today who are in search of heroes. In order to prove to his people that he is worthy of his name, Okonkwo at times does cruel and violent things like beating his wives and killing his adopted son and a court messenger, deeds that earn him the displeasure of both his people and the white men. In other words, those manly qualities which make him a celebrity are also responsible for his downfall; they are the germ of his hybris.

As a contrast of Okonkwo's masculinity, Achebe names the effeminate son of the hero Nwoye. His name suggests a child born on Oye but he is not manly enough to bear the name, Okoye. To Okonkwo, Nwoye's only claim to being a male is that he "wears" a male genital:

He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son? At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness.

He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply. (p. 143)

Nwoye may not be as manly as his father, but he is more humane than Okonkwo who does things blindly in order to win fame. He understands the poetry of human suffering; therefore, he joins the Christians, the words of whose hymn "were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth" (p. 137). So, while the name of Okonkwo connotes violence and destruction, Nwoye's suggests gentleness and life. And while the father dies in his act of violence, the son outlives him to become Isaac, a catechist who helps to persuade his "flock" to stop killing twins and ostracizing their mothers.

PHILOSOPHICAL NAMES

Most of the Igbo names fall within this category. They are short compendious names formed from full-length philosophical statements that express how life has treated the parents of their bearers. They range from expressions of gratitude for good fortunes to hopes for a better tomorrow; from despair to outright defiance. Achebe comments on this kind of naming in *Things Fall Apart*:

Ekwehi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwehi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual. Her deepening despair found expression in the names she gave her children. One of them as a pathetic cry, Onwumbiko—"Death, I implore you." But death took no notice; Onwumbiko died in his fifteenth month. The next child was a girl, Ozoemena—"May it not happen again." She died in her eleventh month, and two others after her. Ekwehi then became defiant and called her next child Onwuma—"Death may please himself." And he did. (p. 74)

Had the children lived, their names would have been living memories of the sorrows and joys of Ekwehi's motherhood. With this background, Achebe introduces his readers to the reason why Ezinma—"Crystal of Beauty" is the favourite child of her parents, Okonkwo and Ekwehi. In this society where people are so fond of children, a

woman without a child is not regarded as a useful person. Children count for more than wealth, which is why some parents name their child Ginikanwa—"What counts for more than a child?" Ekwefi herself was called "Crystal of Beauty" in her youth (p. 158) but that beauty is presently obscured by the recurrent mortality of her infants. The name Ezinma, therefore, symbolized life, the enduring beauty which counts for more than the physical beauty of the child. Her personal good behaviour and love of her parents make her name very suitable. And being such valuable "wealth," Ezinma must be raised up with maximum care. In her bid to do so, Ekwefi becomes an indulgent mother:

Ezinma was an only child and at the center of her mother's world. . . . Ekwefi even gave her such delicacies as eggs, which children were rarely allowed to eat because such food tempted them to steal. One day as Ezinma was eating an egg Okonkwo had come in unexpectedly from his hut. He was greatly shocked and swore to beat Ekwefi if she ever dared to give the child eggs again. But it was impossible to refuse Ezinma anything. (p. 73)

Uchendu—"Thought of Life"—is another of the philosophical names Achebe uses to develop his themes. He is Okonkwo's mother's kinsman who receives him in exile in Mbanta. After Okonkwo narrates his accidental killing of a clansman in Umuofia, Uchendu says with some relief: "It is a female *ochu*," and arranges the requisite rites and sacrifices (p. 119). Uchendu notices that Okonkwo is yielding to despair for having failed to become "one of the lords of his clan," so he gives Okonkwo some advice, which befits Uchendu's name:

Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile. (p. 124)

The advice revives Okonkwo as a result, he decides to live like a man in Mbanta, receiving help from Uchendu and Obierika.

Uchendu's name and role are carefully chosen to contrast with those of the main character: even though Okonkwo is wealthy and warlike, he has a very poor and selfish attitude towards life. It appears he is incapable of any serious thinking, hence he allows others to do his thinking for him. Although he would like to regard himself as independent, he depends on others for his survival: Nwakibie for seed-yams (p. 24); Ezeudu for advice before he realizes that killing his adopted son Ikemefuma is an abomination (p. 55); Obierika for share-

cropping of his yams in Umuofia while he is in exile in Mbanta (p. 131); and Uchendu for counsel and rehabilitation in exile (p. 124). Once he is taught by Uchendu to have a better attitude towards life, Okonkwo remembers how important his deceased mother and her living kinsman are. So he names one of his daughters Nneka—"Mother is supreme" (p. 144), and other child Nwofia—"Begotten in the Wilderness" of his exile (p. 151).

Other philosophical names found in *Things Fall Apart* include: Obierika—"The heart is great/unfathomable," explaining why the man is both a great friend and one capable of serious thinking; Chukwuka—"Chukwu is Supreme," so people worship Him; Akueke—"Gift of Creation" and therefore durable; and, Obiageli—"He who comes (by reincarnation) enjoys wealth." These philosophical names express both individual and group views of life which consummate in Igbo religious and cosmological beliefs.

PRAISE NAMES

This is a convenient term used to cover many honorific appellations and flattering epithets.⁶ Achebe's novels, which discuss among other things the traditional life of the Igbo, are full of praise names because in their society, where age is respected but achievement revered,⁷ such names are in popular demand. They are what gives life to both the achievers (even after they are long dead) and their achievements in people's memories. Unlike dedicatory names which could be given to any child at all by his parents, praise names are achieved, not ascribed; hence they are elitist and esoteric in character. However, the children of achievers may share the fame of their fathers, just as they do the infamy of their "womanly" fathers who are known by the Igbo as *agbala*.

The first group of people who are called praise names are *ozo*-titled men. An initiate of *ozo* society is called the name Ogbuefi which means "Killer of Cows." He is so called because the *ozo* initiation ceremony requires one to kill a cow to entertain older members of his society. The more titles one takes in the society the more cows or other costly animals he kills. Only the rich and wealthy can afford to join the societies and cults. Usually, one joins them at old age, when he has married many wives and produced many children who help him

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁷ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1959), p. 12.

to work the farms that produce the yams and cows for the title-taking ceremonies. But a young achiever like Okonkwo could join the societies because “as the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (p. 12). Some of these praise names are Ogbuefi Udo, Ogbuefi Ezudu, Ogbuefi Ndulue from *Things Fall Apart*; and Ogbuefi Nwaka, Ogbuefi Akuebue, Ogbuefi Anichebe Udeozo from *Arrow of God*. They wield the highest political power in the clan:

The news of Ezeulu’s refusal to call the New Yam Feast spread through Umuaro as rapidly as if it had been beaten out on the *ikolo*. At first people were completely stunned by it; they only began to grasp its full meaning slowly because its like had never happened before.

Two days later ten men of high title came to see him. None of the ten had taken fewer than three titles, and one of them—Ezekwesili Ezukanma—had taken the fourth and highest.

‘Yes, we are Umuaro. Therefore listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest. Do you hear me well? I said go and eat those yams today, not tomorrow; and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of ten of us here. . . .’ (pp. 205 & 208)

Their orders to Ezeulu are not expected to be flouted without some serious political consequences. Ezeulu tried to flout them but he pays dearly for it. Although the titled elders have such powers and authority, they always try to use them for the common good of the people because they represent the founding ancestors of their villages. They give this kind of severe command only when the lives of the citizens are in danger; in this case, the clan is threatened by famine and starvation.

Next to the *ndichie*—ruling title elders—are the spiritual leaders—the priests and priestesses—who are called praise names which describe their roles as chief ritual and ceremonial officers of their respective gods and goddesses. The names include Ezeani, Ezeulu, Ezidemili. It is their high offices that set them apart from other citizens. They are regarded as people who do difficult duties for men and gods; therefore they merit the praise of those they serve. Powerful medicinemen are also given praise names in recognition of their services to the community. For example, Aghadike is given the praise name, Anyanafummo—“Eyes that see spirits”—because he is a good diviner (*AOE*, p. 112).

In some cases characters are given derogatory “praise” names. In *Things Fall Apart*, the priestess of Agbala calls her god the praise name *Chi negbu madu ubosi ndu ya nato ya uto*—“God who kills a

man when his life is sweetest"; that is, at the prime of his life (p. 101). The paradox of this name, of course, is that Agbala as protective god does not kill; only one's offenses do. Such offenses are committed at the prime of one's life. The derogatory "praise" name therefore is intended to cow recalcitrant citizens into obedience. It intimidates even the strongman, Okonkwo and his wife, Ekwefi:

The priestess screamed. "Beware, Okonkwo!" She warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware! . . .

'I will come with you, too,' Ekwefi said firmly. '*Tufia-a!*' the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season.

'How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger. Bring me my daughter.' (pp. 95-6)

A similar praise name is given to Ulu—"the god that kills and saves" (*AOG*, p. 70).

The most satirical of these derogatory "praise" names is that given to the hero of *A Man of the People* Chief the Honourable M. A. Nanga, M.P. The name is loaded with Achebe's oblique puns and subtle comments on the phony patriotism, pseudo-intellectualism, arrant philistinism and political bravado which characterized the activities of the Nigerian intelligentsia and politicians of the early sixties. Immediately after independence, Nigeria established a few local universities which admitted students for bachelors degree programs. Any graduate who happened to earn a masters from an overseas university became first among his equals; and an honorary doctorate was a one-of-a-kind achievement. The higher the degree one added to his name, the more praise he earned from admirers. The educated men paraded their degrees to the envy of the less-educated politicians. For example, Achebe stresses that "The Minister of Finance at the time was a first-rate economist with a Ph.D. in public finance. He presented to the Cabinet a complete plan for dealing with the situation. [But] The Prime Minister said 'No' to the plan" (p. 3). The envy comes through in the commentary carried by *The Daily Chronicle*, an official organ of the P.O.P.:

Let us now and for all time extract from our body-politic as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth all those decadent stooges versed in text-book economics and aping the white man's mannerisms and way of speaking. We are proud to be Africans. Our true leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard degrees but those who

speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above his people. . . . (p. 4)

We recognize the hypocrisy in the call for things African when it is realized that even as they condemn the acquisition of foreign degrees, the politicians, especially Mr. Nanga, secretly yearn for them in order to put themselves above their people. Nanga did not go to the college but he abbreviates his first two names to give him a natural degree, M. A., in addition to being “Chief and Honourable.” The addition of M.P. (which means Member of Parliament) has the sonority of Master of Politics. Having thus “crowned” himself a masters degree holder, he aspires to receive the highest degree, Honorary Ph.D., from an American University, which is as “honourable” as the Honourable Member of Parliament himself:

In spite of this inauspicious beginning Mr. Jalio went ahead and said many flattering things about Chief Nanga, albeit with a clouded face. He said it was a fitting and appropriate tribute to his concern for African Culture—a concern which was known all over the world—that a university in far-away America was soon to honour him with a doctorate degree. (p. 63)

The people like Nanga and that is why he is “A Man of the People”; and that suggests they too are as phony as the character they admire.

A few white officers are given derogatory “praise” names. For example, apart from his world-war title of Captain, Winterbottom bears with pride a derogatory “praise” name which the natives gave to him for his wanton destruction of their guns:

You will be going there frequently on tour. If you hear anyone talking about Otiji-Egbe, you know they are talking about me. Otiji-Egbe means Breaker of Guns. I am even told that all children born in that year belong to a new age-grade of the Breaking of Guns.

Winterbottom, serving the British Administration in Nigeria as District Officer, is a civilian officer but he prefers to be addressed as Captain Winterbottom, a title which serves as a reminder of his military achievements overseas during the World Wars. At one point, the Captain recounts what transpired between him and the natives to a junior officer, Mr. Clarke the Education Officer, in order to reassert his militarism; he tells the story not only to win respect from Clarke but also to solicit indirectly his submission to the Captain’s authority.

The natives also gave a derogatory “praise” name, similar to that

given to Captain Winterbottom, to a notorious and drunken road overseer in *Arrow of God*:

There was at that time a big programme of road and drainage construction following a smallpox epidemic. Chief James Ikedi teamed up with a notorious and drunken road overseer who had earned the title of Destroyer of Compounds from the natives. The plans for the roads and drains had long been completed and approved by Captain Winterbottom himself and as far as possible did not interfere with people's homesteads. But this overseer went around intimidating the villagers and telling them that unless they gave him money the new road would pass through the middle of their compound. (p. 57)

This corrupt practice of a white man, which is aided and abetted by a corrupt native, James Ikedi, was reported to the District Officer, Captain Winterbottom, but instead of being condemned, it is encouraged:

There was no doubt whatever in the mind of Captain Winterbottom that Chief Ikedi was still corrupt and highhanded only cleverer than ever before. The latest thing he did was to get his people to make him an *obi* or king, so that he was now called His Highness Ikedi the First, Obi of Okperi. This among a people who abominated kings! This was what British administration was doing among the Ibos, making a dozen mushroom kings grow where there was none before. (p. 58)

Apart from underlining the contemptible origin of Chief Ikedi's name, the passage bemoans the crudities of British Administrative methods in Igboland which promoted the corruption of the Africans and engendered enmity between them. The resultant corruption and enmity created good opportunities for foreign intervention. Unfortunately, the proliferation of mushroom kings, promoted by the British during the colonial periods has continued to be a major Igbo political problem to date.

METAPHORIC NAMES

In talking about metaphoric names one bears in mind how the names function as metaphors for some subjects. However, I do not intend here a usage of metaphor which introduces the term "tenor" for the subject to which the metaphoric name is applied and the term "vehicle" for the metaphoric name itself; rather, I treat the names as metaphors whose tenors are not stated but implicit in their verbal

contexts.⁸ For example, when Achebe's narrator states: "As a young man of eighteen he [Okonkwo] had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat,"⁹ the subject to which the metaphoric word Cat is applied (that is the agility of the wrestler) is the tenor while the metaphoric word itself is the vehicle. But in the following passage,

The bride's name was Okuata. In tallness she took after her father who came of a race of giants. Her face was finely cut and some people already called her Oyilidie, because she resembled her husband in comeliness. Her full breasts had a very slight upward curve which would save them from falling and sagging too soon, (*AOG*, p. 116)

we find the metaphoric name, Oyilidie, which means "One who resembles her husband in comeliness." The name as metaphor has an unstated but implicit tenor which is comeliness. Oyilidie is a nickname which also gives a further qualification to the woman's actual name, Okuata. Okuata means literally "Fire cannot destroy." Hence when both the proper name and the nickname are combined and given to one bride, we find in her a piece of comeliness which is as indestructible as a piece of metal forged in fire. What a name to have! It is no wonder then that on her wedding night other girls express their joy and admiration in a befitting epithalamic song:

The girls sang a song called *Ifeoma*. Goodly Thing had come, they said, to let everyone who had good things bring them before her as offering. They made a circle round her as she danced to their song. As she danced her husband-to-be and other members of Ezulu's family broke through the circle one by one or two at a time and stuck money on her forehead. She smiled and let the present fall at her feet from where one of the girls picked it up and put it in a bowl. (*Ibid.*)

As a literary technique, Achebe uses metaphoric names more than any other kind of name. Although such names may sound like other common Igbo names, their contextual appearances in the novels help to reduce the ambiguities that foreign readers often encounter. For instance Robert M. Wren alleges:

Often names are somewhat ambiguous. There are several sources of ambiguity. Igbo is a tonal language in which vowels may have rising,

⁸M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 61.

⁹*Things Fall Apart*, p. 7.

falling, or neutral tone. Each tone is capable of altering the meaning of the word entirely. Achebe has not cluttered his text with tonal marks, nor with marks indicative of closed and open vowels (there are exceptions in *Arrow of God* XVI, 186, 191), so pronunciation of the names may be uncertain, even for native Igbo speakers. Finally, meaning is often dependent upon context; the same word may have several different meanings.¹⁰

One would agree with Wren that "often names are somewhat ambiguous" if the names are read in isolation; but when read in context, they are not always ambiguous unless Achebe intentionally intends them to be so for special effects. Let us examine some of the examples that Wren uses in the same section of his book: First, the meaning of Obika. He says, "Ezeulu's son Obika has a name that clearly combines *obi* with the suffix *-ka*, which indicates superiority. Now *obi* is the hut of the head of the family and, by extension, it means one's home or origin. . . . "There's no place like home" is a possible translation of *Obika*." Yes, *obi* as a word could mean hut and the suffix *-ka* can indicate superiority; but when we consider the role Obika plays in the entire novel, the translation does not fit well. Wren translates the suffix *-ka* as indicating superiority but Achebe intends *-ka* to mean "supreme" wherever it is used (as in *Nneka* and *Chukwuka* from *TFA*, pp. 123, 165). Therefore, if we translate *obi* as heart and *-ka* as supreme, we get "the heart is supreme" as a translation of Obika. In context, of course, Obika's role is connected with the heart. He has the heart to love, and his marriage with Okuata is used as an illustration of Igbo marriage custom in *Arrow of God* (p. 115ff); he alone has the heart to run the ritual race of *ogbazuluobodo* despite his fever, in order to stop the ostracism of his family; we are told "A fire began to rage inside his chest" which suggests a possible heart problem (p. 226); and his death also causes his father's heart to break. Besides, Obika is abbreviated from Obierika of *Things Fall Apart* whose role also is connected with heart, just as Nwaka is abbreviated from Nwakibie, both of whose roles are connected with titles, wealth and nobility. So Wren's statement, "Ezeulu's antagonist is Nwaka, a name that translates literally 'superior child,'" is sociological information which is irrelevant to the literary function of the name. One is happy that Wren acknowledges that, "That is an absurd name for a titled, rich, and powerful man" (p. 174).

¹⁰Robert M. Wren, *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe* (Washington D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), pp. 173-174.

Second, the contradiction Wren finds in his own translation of the name Okagbue Uyanwa, “great-one-who-kills-suffering-child,” is due to his heavy dependence on either an Igbo dictionary for meanings of isolated words, or Igbo informants who do not “know” the language. Okagbue Uyanwa means literally “one who uses the spoken word to kill the illness of a child.” Put in context, the medicine man uses the spoken word to exorcise the evil spirits believed to attack the *ogbanje*. Even when he uses medicines and amulets, he makes them potent by saying incantations, prayers and invocations which are living words that can produce definitive curative effects on the illness.

As a guide to appreciating the literary functions of the metaphoric names, one should always consider the context in which the names are used. Secondly, although the names may be common European or Igbo names, they should be regarded as Achebe’s creative inventions whose functions are mainly relevant to the particular context in which they are used. The dictionary of names, therefore, may not explain their literary meanings as much as a careful reading would; in other words, dictionaries may suggest a general but not a particular contextual meaning. An illustration of this reminder could be found in the name Dr. Savage. Ordinarily, Europeans bear the name without any qualms about its meaning. But to the Igbo (and Achebe who writes about them) who are used to bearing meaningful names, such a name must have a significance. The meaning and significance of the name are described thus:

Winterbottom’s delirium lasted three days and in all that time Dr. Savage rarely left his bedside. She even postponed the operations which she performed every Wednesday for which that day was known throughout the village as *Day of the Cutting Open of Bowels*. It was always a sad day and the little daily market which had sprung up outside the gates of the hospital to supply the needs of patients from distant clans attracted fewer market women on Wednesdays than on any other days of the week. It was also noticed that even the sky knew that day of death and mourned in gloom. (*AOG*, p. 150)

Dr. Savage is a surgeon; she performs surgical operations on people in order to save their lives. Ironically the natives mistake her work of mercy for savagery because surgery causes pain and may even result in loss of the lives it is intended to save. Thus the people regard the doctor as the agent of pain and death, and her name is a metaphor for savagery. Achebe implies the irony of the surgeon’s work in her full name, Dr. Mary Savage, which is quite an oxymoronic selection.

PROVERBIAL NAMES

The names of some of the characters are proverbial names. Like proverbs, proverbial names add colour and allusiveness to the character description of those who bear them. For instance, when Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace, he offends Ani and the people:

They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*. . . . This year they talked of nothing else but the *nso-ani* which Okonkwo had committed. It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. (*TFA*, pp. 32–3)

Among the Igbo, the folktale about the proverbial bird *nza* is both popular and funny. The bird is so small and fragile that one is amused to imagine him posing like a wrestler before a crowd of people challenging either his creator or spirit-double to a wrestling match. To do so means signing his own death warrant as well as bringing about disorder in nature. In addition, *nza* has a false sense of his strength. Once the heavy meal is digested and excreted, he comes back to his senses driven by hunger. In other words, *nza* is unaware of the limitation of his momentary contentment with life. When applied to the hero, the name *nza* reminds the people of Okonkwo's poor parentage and momentary affluence in the society. His father was an *agbala* before he died. As the son of such a poor man, Okonkwo had no class until rich people like Nwakibie helped him to make a good start in life which his father could not provide for him. The people believe that their gods, particularly Ani, blessed him, therefore it becomes the height of ingratitude and insult for Okonkwo to break the peace of the land during the sacred week—an act which they regard as an abomination to the goddess of provision, Ani. Okonkwo is too infinitesimal to challenge the earth-goddess. Readers of the novel know that “Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error” (p. 32). However, apart from his failure to show regret openly for his offense, his neighbors have a generally poor opinion about him because “Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit,” usually by dealing brusquely with less successful men and forgetting that his father was one of such men; his achievements have gone to his head, as it were.

A proverbial name similar to *nza* is given to Akukalia and Umuaro in *Arrow of God*; but instead of just being given an animal name, Akukalia is described in a folktale as “a great wrestler whose back had

never known the ground” (p. 26). From the folktale, one notices that Akukalia is pushed by the encouragement of unwary elders to challenge everybody, including men and the gods. The result of such fame-driven and mad adventure is suicide: “So they sent him his personal god, a little wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth” (pp. 26–7). We also notice that those whom Achebe gives the proverbial names have always had a false sense of their strength and achievements. Just as Akukalia fights an Okperi man because Umuaro elders unwittingly encourage him to do so, Umuaro in this scene is being encouraged by their orator, Nwaka, to fight “a war of blame” with Okperi. Ezeulu unsuccessfully advises against war:

‘Men of Umuaro, why do you think our fathers told us this story? They told it because they wanted to teach us that no matter how strong or great a man was he should never challenge his *chi*. This is what our kinsman did—he challenged his *chi*. We were his flute player, but we did not plead with him to come away from death. Where is he today? The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave. But let us leave Akukalia aside; he has gone the way his *chi* ordained.

‘But let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes. Umuaro is today challenging its *chi*. Is there any man or women in Umuaro who does not know Ulu, the deity that destroys a man when his life is sweetest to him? Some people are still talking of carrying war to Okperi. Do they think Ulu will fight in blame? Today the world is spoilt and there is no longer head or tail in anything that is done. But Ulu is not spoilt with it. If you go to war to avenge a man who passed shit on the head of his mother’s father, Ulu will not follow you to be soiled in the corruption. . . .’
(p. 27)

From Ezeulu’s speech we can obtain the proverbial names, unwary “fly” and impudent “wrestler” given to Akukalia; and “flute player” of death or *Ogbu opi onwu* given to Umuaro elders. The names give us a lot of insight into the character of Akukalia who dies because of his impudence and impatience—traits which also characterize the role of the elders when they fail to give good counsel to the young and impatient, who are rather driven to their graves:

Umuaro killed four men and Okperi replied with three, one of the three being Akukalia’s brother, Okoye. The next day, Afo, saw the war brought to a sudden close. The white man, Wintabota, brought soldiers to Umuaro and stopped it. (p. 28)

Thus the revenge for the death of Akukalia is carried out by Umuaro

in spite of Ezeulu's disapproval of it, but it costs them three extra lives; a cost which a little patience and caution would have prevented.

In *No Longer at Ease*, the proverbial name *nza* is used again but this time as a reference to an aspiring but audacious politician who, hearing the news about popular politicians, "took it into his head to challenge the national hero":

'He is a foolish somebody,' said one of the men in English.

'He is like the bird *nza* who after a big meal so far forgot himself as to challenge his *chi* to a single combat,' said another Ibo. (p. 148)

What the people are condemning is not the ambition of a young man becoming a political candidate; rather it is his effrontery in challenging their national hero whom they think is beyond the opposition of a young, unfledged and inexperienced man. Such an adventure could result in the young man's destruction. The futility of a young man's challenge of his elder is conveyed in the statement Edna's father makes to Odili in *A Man of the People*:

'My in-law is like a bull,' he said, 'and your challenge is like the challenge of a tick to a bull. The tick fills its belly with blood from the back of the bull and the bull doesn't even know it's there. He carries it wherever he goes—to eat, drink or pass ordure. Then one day the cattle egret comes, perches on the bull's back and picks out the tick. . . .' (p. 106)

While one regards "bull" and "tick" as the proverbial references made to Chief M. A. Nanga and Odili Samalu respectively as they engage in campaign struggles, the politicians as a group are described in another context as vultures:

'There were three vultures,' said the ex-policeman after the applause had subsided. 'The third and the youngest was called C. P. C.' (pp. 124–5)

What is common to all the examples of proverbial names that we have so far cited is that they are descriptive names taken from folktales, especially etiological tales. They are names used to describe the behaviour of young men who fail to show the respect for age which the people value so much. But the proverbial names can also be given to people who commit other social offenses such as insincerity or unnecessary cunning. An example of this latter group of proverbial names is found in a folktale about a tortoise who boycotted his mother's funeral; it is told by Nathaniel as an indirect condemnation of Obi Okonkwo for failing to attend his mother's funeral in Umuofia.

Although it is a bad joke told in a bad time, Tortoise is nevertheless a fitting name for the man who cunningly shirks his filial duties.¹¹

Strictly speaking, the proverbial names belong to the metaphoric names group, but they are put here in a separate group because of their proverbial qualities. For instance, when Amalinze is called the Cat, our first response to the name is to think of what it connotes—the agility of the animal which helps it to avoid touching its back on the ground; and then the animal quality is transferred to the human being whose quickness is comparable to that of the cat. Cat is a metaphoric name. But when Obi Okonkwo is called a Tortoise, the connotation of the name goes beyond a casual reference to the physical movement of the animal. Hence Tortoise is a proverbial name which recalls all the folktales which involve the behaviour of Tortoise and each of such tales has some cunning in it. Proverbial names contain elements of proverbs, folktales, metaphor and personification all of which are encapsulated in a single name used in identifying a character. In spite of the cryptic qualities of proverbial names, folks understand them as easily as they do proper proverbs.

OTHER NAMES

So far the discussion of names has covered those names that Achebe gave to human beings and, in a few cases, to some gods. But since Achebe also makes a literary use of names of non-humans, such other names as those given to clans and villages, spirits, age groups, and places require our brief attention.

The clan and village names which the author uses most in his novels are those with the prefix, *umu*, as in Umuofia, Umuazu, Umuaro, Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo. *Umu* means “children” of whoever or whatever follows the prefix. Hence Umunneora literally means “children of mother of a crowd.” The crowd is the village or clan whose male founders’ descent can be traced to one known woman. According to V. C. Uchendu,¹² Igbo society has a strong patrilineal emphasis. The whole society can be mapped into a number of agnatic groups (*umunna*). And rights over the use of land depend primarily on agnatic descent, and secondarily on local residence. Achebe, therefore, uses the village and clan

¹¹ Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 148–149.

¹² Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 64.

names not only as a means of indicating the agnatic descent of the people about whose lives he is writing but also as a way of emphasizing the social security and comfort that are concomitant with the lineage of a founding father. The Igbo man's knowledge of his common descent with others in a village or clan is what has preserved the age-long extended family system—a social institution which provides moral and social security to Igbo people. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo can boldly ask Nwakibie for a grant of yams, for share-cropping without any security. Nwakibie is not a close relative, but he gives Okonkwo the yams because they have a common descent which makes Okonkwo address Nwakibie as “Nna ayi” (“Our father”).¹³ It is to Uchendu, one of the members of his extended family, that Okonkwo goes in exile.¹⁴ The killing of a clansman is regarded as an abomination because of the same reason that all clansmen are *umunneora*. No man with an iota of conscience can kill his brother unless the killing is inadvertent. In a word, the place names Achebe uses generally indicate the kinship system of the Igbo.

In the actual Igbo world, the system provides the same moral and social security: to avoid incest, an Igbo man goes outside his own agnatic group or village to marry, and in time of adversity, he runs to his “brothers” for protection. What happened to the Igbo during the recent Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) is a perfect example of the moral and social security that the Igbo extended family system provides. Those driven out of various regions of Nigeria were rehabilitated by their kinsmen when they returned to Igbo country. And after the war, they did not wait for the government in Lagos to help them rebuild their broken lives; they depended on their rich agnates “to get up”¹⁵ and were given social security and comfort.

This seeming aside on clan and village names is useful in answering Ihechukwu Madubuike's thematic question, “What is in a name?”¹⁶ Village and clan names serve psychological and therapeutic purposes to citizens of such places. A citizen of Umuofia *obodo dike* (Land of the brave) does not fear outside invasion because the name of the clan alone is enough to scare unfriendly and *womanly* villages to a point of not planning any wars at all against Umuofia. Those who risk offend-

¹³ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵ Uchendu, p. 64.

¹⁶ Ihechukwu Madubuike, *A Handbook of African Names* (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1967), p. 7.

ing Umuofia, as did Mbaino—“four (clan) villages”—whom Ogbuefi Ezeugo contemptuously calls “Those sons of wild animals,” are usually made to pay a heavy price for their insult; Mbaino gave Ikemefuna and a young girl to Umuofia to replace Ogbuefi Udo’s wife whom they murdered.¹⁷ In *No Longer At Ease*, the same group effort is made by the Umuofia Progressive Union to give Obi Okonkwo some moral support as he faces bribery charges in a Lagos courtroom. They know he is guilty but he must be saved first before being reproached:

The men of Umuofia were prepared to fight to the last. They had no illusions about Obi. He was, without doubt, a very foolish and self-willed young man. But this was not the time to go into that. The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush. (*NLAE*, p. 5)

Place names describe obliquely the history and behaviour of the villages or clans and their citizens. Let us examine a few of them:

- Umuofia: “children of a land area” owned by a founding father. The citizens must unite and fight to protect the land and avoid shaming the living-dead ancestors of the clan.
- Umuazu: “Late comers” into the clan; when the clan is distributing its property, Umuazu are the last to receive a share.
- Umuaro: “Weighty community” because Ulu unites the villages that make up the clan and thus gives them strength to fight Abam head-hunters and arsonists.
- Umuagu: “Descendants of Agu”; Agu means tiger which originally became a praise name given to a man who is as quick and aggressive as a tiger. The citizens of Umuagu are inspired by the name to develop a military prowess necessary for defending their clan and the reputation of their founding fathers.
- Umuachala: the same as Umuofia except that the original land area was covered by *achala*, a type of bamboo.
- Umuezeani: “Children of Ezeani”; it is a name which differentiates the original owners of the land from late comers to the clan such as Umuazu. From Umuezeani the priest of the earth-goddess is appointed. His high priestly office makes him Ezeani. Umuezeani is a “holy” village since the clan priests are chosen from there.

¹⁷ *Things Fall Apart*, pp. 14–16.

The symbolism of the names is taught to the citizens through initiation rites. Talking drums evoke emotional responses from villagers during festal and ritual occasions as they call the praise names of the villages. Village leaders elicit the same emotional response during clan meetings. Umuofia is *obodo dike* and Umuaro is *obodonesi!* The response of "Yaa!" or "Hem!" which follows the salutation of "*kwenu*"¹⁸ signifies strength, unity and agreement that the clan needs in order to "act like one" when pursuing a common enemy. If the response is not given by the people, then no action will be taken at all. "Unity is strength" is a popular Igbo saw.

The psychological significance of the names given to age groups and their masks can be illustrated with the following examples from *Arrow of God*. Obika's age group and their new mask are called Otakagu—a name which means literally "one who devours more than a tiger"; it is a good descriptive name for the tumultuousness and aggressiveness of the youths and the new Mask they are launching:

The coming of a new Mask was always an important occasion especially when as now it was a Mask of high rank. In the last few days there had been a lot of coming and going among members of the Otakagu age group. Those of them who had leading roles to play at the ceremony would naturally be targets of malevolence and envy and must therefore be 'hard-boiled' in protective magic. But even the others had to have some defensive preparation rubbed into shallow cuts on the arm. (AOG, p. 194)

Perhaps it is this kind of spiritual and occult preparation which the youths make that emboldens Obika to attack Otakekpele, a man known throughout Umuaro as a wicked medicine man. But it seems that Achebe uses the occasion to tell us about the rash, aggressive and intransigent nature of Obika, the son of a headstrong Chief Priest, Ezeulu:

Obika was now pointing at Otakekpele and then pointing at his own chest. He was telling the man that if he wanted to do something useful with his life he should get up. The other man continued to laugh at him. Obika renewed his progress but not with the former speed. He prowled like a leopard, his matchet in his right hand and leather band of amulets on his left arm. Ezeulu was biting his lips. It would be Obika, he thought, the rash, foolish Obika. Did not all the other young men see Otakekpele and look away? But his son could never look away. Obika—

¹⁸ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 14 and *Arrow of God*, p. 26.

Ezeulu stopped in mid-thought. With the flash of lightning Obika had dropped his matchet, rushed forward and in one movement lifted Otakekpele off the ground and thrown him into the near-by brush in a shower of sand. . . . (p. 198)

Agaba is another age group Mask. Achebe remarks that "it stood for the power and aggressiveness of youth. It continued its progress and its song, such as it was. As it got near the centre of the *ilo* it changed into the song called *Onye ebuna uzo cho ayi okwu*. It was an appeal to all and sundry not to be the first to provoke the ancestral Mask" (p. 199). One wishes Obika had heeded the advice. Agaba then becomes the opposite of Otakagu in temperament.

Commenting on how names become a part of characterization in West African novels E. N. Obiechina observes that:

Though in the traditional culture the individual, apart from his physical characteristics, is also distinguishable by his proper name and praise-name, title-name and perhaps aliases as well, it must be observed that he is less an autonomous individual than in the Western sense.

. . . He is born into a clan already bearing an ancestral stamp, for he is supposed to be under the tutelary influence of one of his ancestors whose name he bears. He will, if he lives long enough, beget children who will continue the life of the clan. . . . The individual has a real existence only in terms of the general social framework of the community. . . . Thus at birth he becomes a new member of his clan, at his naming ceremony he acquires a personal identity and a personality, at initiation he ceases to be a child and becomes a social adult, at marriage he begins his own nuclear family and acquires a higher responsibility for protecting his descendants and guarding the mores and traditions of the clan.¹⁹

The types of names—proper names, praise names, title names, and some aliases—as well as functions of names and naming that Obiechina's commentary touches upon are all covered in Achebe's novels. We have used our own arbitrary terminology and classification as a convenient means of giving the names a literary evaluation.

In summary: the onomastic strategies Achebe employs in his novels are characteristic of his realistic writing—a quality that makes his works seem faithful to actual Igbo folkways. Although the use of specific names may vary from novel to novel, generally names identify

¹⁹Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in The West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 83.

character types, reflect the philosophical and moral positions which the characters represent, establish metaphorical connections among characters, and provide clues to the meaning of a novel's action. Onomastics for Achebe is thus not merely an ornamental device, but is one of the most vital aspects of his art.²⁰

²⁰The conclusion is a paraphrase of Paul F. Ferguson's concluding paragraph of his essay, "By Their Names You Shall Know Them: Flannery O'Connor's Onomastic Strategies," in *Literary Onomastics Studies*, Vol. VII, pp. 87–105.